**Kennan and Containment**

George Kennan, a career Foreign Service Officer, was responsible for the policy of “containment”. This strategy was used in many different forms throughout the Cold War (1947-1989) with the Soviet Union. The ideas of Kennan became the basis of the Truman administration’s foreign policy, and first came to public attention in 1947 in the form of an anonymous entry to *Foreign Affairs*, the so-called “X-Article.”

“The main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union,” Kennan wrote, “must be a long-term, patient, but firm containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” To that end, he called for countering “Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world” through the “application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geo-political points, corresponding to maneuvers of Soviet policy.”

Such a policy, Kennan predicted, would “promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual decline of Soviet power.”

Kennan’s policy was controversial from the very beginning. Most notably, John Foster Dulles declared that the American policy should not be containment, but the “rollback” of Soviet power and the eventual “liberation” of Eastern Europe. There was also disagreement between Kennan and Paul Nitze, who was the new director of the Policy Planning Staff. Nitze, who saw the Soviet threat primarily in military terms, interpreted Kennan’s call for application of “counter-force” to mean using military power.

In contrast, Kennan, who considered the Soviet threat to be primarily political, advocated economic assistance (i.e. the Marshall Plan) and “psychological warfare” (propaganda and covert operations) to counter the spread of Soviet influence. In 1950, Nitze’s ideas won out over Kennan’s.

NSC 68, a policy document prepared by the National Security Council and signed by Truman, called for a huge increase in the U.S. military budget. The paper also expanded containment beyond the defense of major centers of industrial power to the entire world. “In the context of the present polarization of power,” it read, “a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere.”

Despite the criticisms and the policy defeats that Kennan suffered in the early 1950s, containment in the more general sense (blocking the expansion of Soviet influence) remained the basic strategy of the United States throughout the Cold War. On the one hand, the United States did not withdraw into isolationism; on the other, it did not push to “roll back” Soviet power.

It is possible to say that each of the presidential administrations after Truman, until the collapse of communism in 1989, adopted some variation of Kennan’s containment policy and made it their own.

**Guiding Reading Questions:**

1. **What did Kennan predict would happen to the Soviet Union after containment?**

1. **What other policies were proposed? And who proposed them?**
2. **How did Kennan view the Soviet threat? What were the specific strategies of containment?**
3. **Who won the policy debate? How do you know, or what evidence supports your answer?**

**The Formation of NATO**

By the end of 1947 the United States had implemented a strategy of containing the Soviet Union, and part of this strategy involved moving forward with the creation of a strong and independent Germany. Ever since the end of World War II there had been negotiations about the fate of Germany, with the Soviet Union refusing to consider any plan linking Germany to the West.

From the perspective of the United States and its Allies, however, the continuing division of Germany into four zones of occupation was standing in the way of Europe's economic recovery. Therefore, in February 1948 the United States and Britain announced that they were merging their zones and issuing a common currency for both. Stalin believed this was an attempt to influence Germany and isolate the Soviet Union.

In response, Red Army troops in the Soviet occupation zone began interfering with traffic between the British and American zones and the capital city of Berlin. Two months later, when France announced that it was merging its zone with the British and Americans, Stalin ordered the complete stoppage of all traffic between West Berlin and Western Germany.

This left a civilian population of two million, and substantial numbers of British, French, and American troops, cut off from any source of food or fuel. Truman considered several options for meeting the challenge. Some advocated withdrawing from Berlin, while others suggested sending an armored train to force its way through the blockade.

Truman, however, was unwilling either to surrender the city or risk starting a war, so he ordered U.S. aircraft to start carrying the necessary supplies into Berlin by air. Over the next eleven months thousands of tons of food, coal, and clothing were brought into the city in what became known as the Berlin Airlift. Rather than shoot the aircraft down and risk war, Stalin lifted the blockade in May 1949.

The Berlin blockade and airlift had a dramatic effect in most of Western Europe. Already, there had been discussions about a mutual security arrangement to protect Great Britain, France, and others from Germany. However, the Soviet Union now seemed a more immediate threat, and these countries knew their combined armed forces were no match for the Red Army, which was the largest in the world.

They therefore wanted some guarantee that the United States would intervene to defend them against a Soviet invasion. The Truman administration provided this by signing on to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in April 1949. Truman then followed up on this in July by asking Congress for $1.45 billion in military aid for Western Europe. For the first time in its history, the United States had formally committed itself during peacetime to the defense of other nations.

**Guiding Reading Questions:**

1. **What was standing in the way of Europe’s recovery? How did the United States try to fix it?**
2. **How did Stalin respond to British and American actions in Germany?**
3. **What was Truman’s solution to the problem in Berlin? Why was it successful?**
4. **What did the Truman administration do to help defend against Soviet invasion?**